



National Middle School Association

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Dear Colleague,

What makes a quality middle school teacher? Deep knowledge of the subjects they teach. A thorough understanding and appreciation of 10- to 15-year-olds. Specialized training in designing creative and challenging lessons and tests. A desire to learn along with their students.

Achieving academic excellence is not an accident. It happens because of caring and committed teachers who know their subjects well and know how to convey them to their students. At least 100 studies in the past decade have documented that fully prepared teachers are more effective in the classroom and that their students learn more as a result. These findings support the need for the “how to” portion of teacher development and dispel the myth that only subject matter knowledge is necessary to be a good teacher.

At National Middle School Association, we believe that preparing middle grades teachers must not be an either-or situation. All students should have teachers who are specialists in their fields and know how to relate, not just deliver, lessons to young adolescent learners.

Why are we sharing this issue with you? Because you are a leader in education, and we want to make sure you are aware of a movement in the United States to make teacher preparation a “crash course” so people with college degrees but little or no background in education can be certified to teach. This movement claims that as long as a person knows a subject well, he or she can teach it. Yet, research shows, and the comments of young adolescents support, the fallacy of this argument. Effective teaching methods are equally important to strong subject knowledge. You can’t have one without the other.

Unfortunately, many states continue to ignore the demand for thorough middle grades preparation and certification, many school districts continue to hire unqualified instructors for hard-to-fill teaching positions, and many students continue to suffer because of these shortsighted decisions.

Listen to what young adolescents around the country say about the teachers who make a difference in their lives:

“The class that I like the most is science because my teacher really encourages us to learn,” said an eighth grade boy. *“We do a lot of hands-on things about interesting topics.”*

A seventh-grader appreciated that her math teacher *“was very hands on. She communicated clearly. We did a lot of projects, and she made the class come together.”*

Another seventh-grade girl gave her language arts teacher the ultimate compliment by inspiring students to learn: *“My teacher could make a brick interesting.”*

“I think that my favorite class is French because I love the way my teacher teaches,” a sixth grade girl said. *“And I have learned more in the past seven weeks than I have in my past seven years.”*

These adolescents are fortunate because they have expert teachers who set high standards for themselves and for their students. However, many other adolescents are not so lucky. They labor in classrooms with teachers who do not have sufficient background in the subjects they teach, who do not know or use a variety of effective instructional methods, and who do not realize that adolescents are capable of making significant leaps in learning during the middle grades.

Research has shown that the brains and bodies of human beings grow faster during adolescence than at any other stage of life besides infancy. But just as babies need adequate nourishment and stimulation to grow, young adolescents need a healthy diet of compassion and inspiration with their daily dose of ABCs.

You hold the future of our schools in your hands. As you explore this issue and others that affect the lives of America’s children, please look to National Middle School Association (NMSA) for information and support. Since its inception in 1973, NMSA has provided a voice for those committed to meeting the educational and developmental needs of young adolescents. With more than 30,000 members-representing principals, teachers, central office staff, professors, college students, parents, educational consultants, and community leaders in the United States and 49 other countries-we stand ready to assist you. Please do your part to give every child the kind of education that this youngster may only dream of:

“Teachers, kids, everyone would be respectful and nice. The school would be happy, colorful, welcoming. Everyone there would have a purpose. Teachers would always want to teach. And students would always want to learn.” (Seventh-grader)

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sue Swaim".

Sue Swaim
Executive Director

RESEARCH IN SUPPORT OF HIGH QUALITY MIDDLE LEVEL TEACHERS

CURRENT RESEARCH FINDINGS

National Middle School Association strongly believes that:

- Teachers have the single greatest impact on student learning.
- Educators in middle level schools need preparation and training specific to those grades.
- Distinctive middle grades licensure should be mandatory in all states.

Research supports what effective middle level teachers and principals already know:

- Specialized teacher preparation is critical to student success.
- Students learn more when their teachers have high academic and instructional skills¹.
- Middle level teachers give the highest ratings to teacher education programs that have the most courses specifically related to working with young adolescents.

In an extensive study of middle grades teachers in a large midwestern state, researchers established a positive relationship between middle level teacher certification and student achievement².

- 1) Elementary and middle level certified teachers use what research concludes are **best instructional practices**, such as interdisciplinary teaming, interactive lessons, and authentic assessment, much more frequently than secondary certified teachers.
- 2) Middle level certified teachers whose schools have **adopted interdisciplinary teaming** with high levels of common planning time (minimum 4 meetings per week, 30 minutes or more per meeting) use these best practices most often.
- 3) Schools engaged in interdisciplinary teaming with high levels of common planning have **greater gains in student achievement** over time.

The results of this study suggest that improvements in student achievement can occur when schools serving young adolescents...

- Hire middle grades certified teachers;
- Provide resources and supports, such as interdisciplinary teaming and common planning time; and
- Adopt research-based best practices, including interactive instruction and critical-thinking exercises.



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1. National Center for Education Statistics (2000). *Monitoring School Quality: An Indicators Report*, U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Research and Improvement. NCES 2001-030.

2. Mertens, S., Flowers, N., & Mulhall, P. (2002). The relationship between middle grades teacher certification and teaching practices. In V. A. Anfara, Jr. & S. L. Stacki (Eds.), *Middle School Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment* (pp. 119-138). Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.